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The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and Department of Homeland Security: Working Together to Protect Agriculture

On November 21, 2002, President Bush signed legislation creating the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to unify Federal forces and protect our Nation from a new host of terrorist threats. More than 22 Federal agencies were consolidated into the new department, including portions of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

After a long and distinguished history in USDA, approximately 2,600 employees from APHIS' Agriculture Quarantine and Inspection (AQI) force became part of DHS' Border and Transportation Security's Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (BCBP) on March 1, 2003. Three months later, on June 1, 2003, the property and facilities of USDA's Plum Island Animal Disease Center, jointly run by APHIS and USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS), are being transferred to DHS.

Border Security

APHIS' efforts to protect American agriculture have long been the first line of defense against the introduction of foreign plant and animal pests and diseases at our Nation's ports of entry. This critical mission will now be carried out by DHS. Since September 11, 2001, APHIS continues to be on heightened alert against both intentional and unintentional threats to agricultural resources.

The transfer of AQI to DHS brings together agricultural inspectors, as well as certain U.S. Customs and Immigration and Naturalization Service employees, in an effort to secure our borders and ports of entry, while still facilitating the movement of legitimate trade and travelers. Creating a consolidated border inspection organization allows for unprecedented information sharing, streamlined services, cross training among specialists, and

innovative techniques that weren't previously possible when border inspection was the responsibility of three separate agencies. Rather than limiting agriculture inspection to a relatively small cadre of specialized inspectors, BCBP greatly expands the number of inspectors who can screen air passengers and vehicles at land border crossings for prohibited agricultural products.

To help DHS in this effort, AQI's Beagle Brigade has also moved to the new department. These highly trained detector dogs sniff the baggage and vehicles of international travelers as they arrive in the United States to identify prohibited agricultural products. When one of these specially trained beagles detects a prohibited item, it sits to alert its handler. APHIS will maintain responsibility for training new members of the Beagle Brigade as well as their handlers. In addition, APHIS will continue to train all inspectors in the science of pest and disease exclusion.

Agricultural Policy

Although DHS is now responsible for protecting our Nation's borders, APHIS will continue to determine what agricultural products can come into the country and what products pose a risk and should be kept out. Through risk assessments, pathway analysis, and rulemaking, APHIS continues to set agricultural policy that is then carried out by DHS. This complementary role fulfills the President's objectives for having a more unified border inspection force while at the same time affirming and preserving APHIS' expertise in setting agricultural import policies.

Plum Island

In addition to the transfer of APHIS' AQI program, the property and facilities at the Plum Island Animal Disease Center are now a part of DHS as well. Located off Long Island, NY, Plum Island is the only location in the United States where infectious foreign animal disease agents can be studied. Both APHIS and ARS employees will continue to perform research and diagnostic work for USDA at Plum Island, but the property now belongs to DHS. This includes approximately 850 acres and 50 buildings along with other structures on the island, such as wastewater plants, needed to run the facilities.

Continued Cooperation

Safeguarding the health of animals, plants, and ecosystems is only possible through the continued cooperation of APHIS and DHS. APHIS is committed to fostering the smooth transition of its employees and facilities, and the long-term success of the new department. Since the concept of a department for homeland security was first announced, APHIS has provided information that has been critical in shaping DHS and its role in protecting agriculture. While some safeguarding responsibilities have been passed to DHS, APHIS will continue to play an important role in preserving America's agricultural resources. In this role, APHIS will work to strengthen and expand its pest detection programs as well as its partnerships with States, industry, and academic institutions.

In the event of an agri-terror attack on our homeland, DHS and APHIS will work as partners to safeguard America's food and agricultural resources. DHS will lead the team of first responders to contain and manage the threat while APHIS provides crucial scientific and diagnostic expertise. This expertise will be critical in managing a potential disease outbreak as well as assisting DHS in its investigative and intelligence-gathering efforts to find those responsible for the terrorist attack. Today's world presents new threats to U.S. agriculture, and this partnership creates a stronger line of defense to protect our Nation's agricultural resources.

Additional Information

For more information about APHIS and homeland security, please visit the APHIS Web site at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/lpa/issues/homeland/homeland.html>.

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